

# Strengthening unions: the case of irrigated agriculture in the Brazilian North East

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About half of the Brazilian North East is occupied by the *Sertao*, a semi-desert area some three times the size of Great Britain, which is both very poor and densely populated. The region is, however, crossed by the San Francisco river, whose valley, especially around the towns of Petrolina and Juazeiro, has been the scene of huge socio-economic upheavals.

The first occurred in two stages, corresponding to the filling in 1979 and 1987 of two World Bank-funded hydro-electric dams: as a direct result, 100,000 people were displaced, some of whom became landless.

The second, more gradual, upheaval started in the mid-1970s with the decision to expand irrigated agriculture. Individuals and large private groups, attracted by the infrastructure put in place by the government, along with generous financial incentives, invested hundreds of millions of dollars along the banks of the San Francisco.

Two fruits, mangoes and grapes, soon experienced considerable success in both domestic and export markets. The grapes that are found in British, French, and German supermarkets at Christmas-time come from this part of Brazil. The vineyards provide significant employment: more than 15,000 labourers work there, the majority being permanent and female. The other labour-intensive crops, for example tomatoes and onions, tend to have a variable contingent of workers, depending on the period, paid by day or by season during harvests.

All these developments, along with the influx of small peasant farmers fleeing the terrible droughts that ravage the *Sertao* every ten years, explain why Petrolina and Juazeiro have seen an unprecedented growth in their populations and economies over the last two decades.

## New union strategies

These transformations have forced the rural workers' unions (which in Brazil are organised by municipality) to rethink their strategy in the Sub-Medio San Francisco. Initially focused on small farmers, they had first to mobilise their efforts to help the victims of the big dams, demanding their resettlement on new lands. From the early 1990s, the more dynamic of these set up specific structures to defend the rights of the increasingly numerous salaried workers in irrigated agriculture. Two unions in the state of Pernambuco (Petrolina and Santa Maria de Boa Vista) effectively took up the defence of these wage labourers, despite the fact that on the other bank of the river, in the State of Bahia, their opposite numbers carried on with clientilistic policies focused on small farmers.

After being defeated in 1991 during the first attempt at negotiating with the owners of the irrigated farms, the two unions decided at the end of 1993 to start a big education and mobilisation campaign among the wage labourers. This time they benefited from two sources of support. On the one hand they had advisers, experienced lawyers and negotiators from the regional and national union federations. On the other, they received a small grant (US\$6,300) from Oxfam (UK and Ireland), to finance an educational campaign on basic labour rights. This represented cash which they did not have, given the small number of workers actually unionised. The majority of the workers are essentially poor migrants from the arid zones of the *Sertao*, for whom wage labour and irrigated agriculture are completely new.

A large mobilisation process preceded the difficult negotiation phase. Information meetings were organised at people's places of work and living quarters, where the main demands of the workers were focused, as well as general assemblies in the two towns. Finally in February 1994, the first collective agreement in the San Francisco valley was signed: a significant occasion, which the Brazilian Minister of Labour attended in person. The agreement was valid for a year, and a new round of negotiation took place in February 1995, when new advances were made.

## Improvements for the wage labourers

So what are the results a year and a half after the signing of the first accord? In terms of the direct benefits for the workers, the most important is without doubt the increase in wages. In 1995, the permanent workers were getting a minimum wage plus 10 per cent, which is around US\$110 monthly; and a decrease in irregular employment (the employers registering their workers more than in the past, thus guaranteeing them

their basic social rights). Overall, the working conditions have improved, even though they remain far from the ideal, as we shall see.

As far as the unions are concerned, the benefits are also visible. Following the campaign, the number of unionised wage labourers more than doubled, rising from 1,400 to 3,500, of whom 2,500 regularly pay their subscription. The unions have strengthened both their constituency and their financial autonomy. They also won free access to the farms at certain times for the union representatives; stable employment; and the right to two days' leave per month.

From Oxfam's point of view, a simple analysis of the ratio of costs (for Oxfam) versus the benefits (for the workers) demonstrates the multiplier effect of financing the campaign for the workers' rights. Following the 1994 campaign, about 20,000 workers each gained US\$6.47 extra each month. (The net monthly salary in 1993 was US\$64.70.) Calculating on the basis of 13 months' annual salary, that makes US\$1.68 million from financial support of US\$6,300, representing a multiplier ratio of 1:267. Of course, Oxfam is not the only factor in the campaign's success. Apart from the dynamism of the unions, the end of the terrible drought which assailed the North East between 1990 and 1993 also contributed to the reduction in available labour, and thus helped in the negotiations. Oxfam's support was necessary but not sufficient to achieving the package of results.

Finally, it is important to mention the increasing number of women who are engaged in union activity, becoming union representatives and indeed leading the strikes. Apart from the fact that they are in the majority in the vineyards, it is the women who are particularly affected by forms of abuse, ranging from sexual harassment by the overseers to the dismissal of pregnant women and the latter's exposure to the spraying of poisonous products. Here again, Oxfam has played an advisory role, insisting that gender questions have a special treatment at the very heart of the union.

## A limited victory

Though there have been some concrete gains, there is still much to be done. Firstly, despite the support of the Federal Labour Office, the majority of the clauses in the accord are not respected. For example, the spraying of toxic chemicals continues to be carried out during work hours, and there is often no drinking water available, thus obliging the workers to drink the polluted water direct from the irrigation channels.

Secondly, it is the permanent workers who have most benefited from the accord, though these are on fixed-term contracts. However, the great mass

of day and seasonal labourers are very difficult to organise, particularly as many live several hundred kilometres away, making the return journey between their home areas in the *Sertão* and the banks of the river each year. Thus the most numerous and the most exploited category, the seasonal workers (and very often their children) is for the moment beyond the reach of the union. An illustration of this is the dreadful labour fair that draws together several thousand labourers on the outskirts of Petrolina. The work these people do in the tomato and onion plantations has been classed as semi-slavery by a regional newspaper not given to exaggeration.

Finally, the accord takes in only one bank of the river, on the Pernambuco side. On the other, in the state of Bahia, the situation has hardly changed. Indeed, there could be a negative impact: lower salaries in Bahia could encourage new business concerns to give preference to establishing there in the future.

## Limits of the development model

Over and above the question of employment, one is faced with the development model itself. On this, the union's stand is ambivalent. While calling for agrarian reform, it is not putting forward any concrete proposal that takes into account the specific situation of the riverine region.

Let us go back to the problem of the wage labourers: what is a monthly wage of US\$110 worth? In Brazil, it is just about enough to buy a basic food ration, which covers only the minimum nutritional needs of a family of four. In other words, it is a miserable salary. The 40 per cent of families in Juazeiro (population 130,000) who live in poverty are testimony to that.

Further, the great majority of workers who are 'lucky' enough to get this wage work in the vineyards. Their work depends on the employment of a large number, five per hectare, of poorly qualified and ill-paid people. A simple calculation based on the rate of productivity (30 tonnes per hectare per year over two and a half pickings) demonstrates that there is little scope for increases in the workers' wages. A monthly wage of US\$200 for the employees would mean no profit for the owners. Further, some would assert that this method does not allow for the simultaneous production of a large quantity and good-quality grapes, so that exports are limited to the months of November and December, when Brazil has a monopoly of the world market. As far as the domestic market is concerned, purchasing power is limited and it is unlikely that there will be a large increase in sales of an unessential product such as grapes.

In short, whether it be grapes or other products, apart from the climatic

and financial conditions in the region, it is the low wages that make it attractive to business. The unions can go on attacking the low wages and employment conditions, but they will always come up against the 'economic imperative', unless they can come up with other suggestions for the way production is organised, or (better still) come up with new options that are both economically viable and socially just.

Finally, we should mention the serious ecological threats faced by the region. Among the worst are the salination of the irrigated areas resulting from poor drainage, the pollution of the river from fertiliser and pesticides and increasing waste from urban areas, and the silting of the river brought on by deforestation of the bordering areas. These phenomena are already advanced enough for some experts to be talking of the death of the river, in other words its loss of commercial viability (irrigation as well as fishing and energy generation) within two or three generations. The potential loss of productivity, and thus employment, due to the salination of the soils, should concern the unions.

## Conclusion

If we are really talking about strengthening the unions of the Sub Medio San Francisco, this should include giving them access to a range of information about international business, the agri-food business, restructuring of world production and irrigation techniques, and their long-term impacts on the environment, thus encouraging them to get beyond the level of immediate labour issues. This would require promoting real networking with other unions and NGOs working in the heartland of the *Sertao*. In effect, the absence of a serious programme for the 12 million rural inhabitants of these semi-arid lands, and the resultant migration towards the river and large urban centres on the coast, constitute the fundamental problems of regional development.

Without a range of information that would allow them to participate in defining and implementing new directions for development, unions as well as NGOs risk being left in the wake of a development model that is led by global economic forces, by the business-owning class in Brazil whose sole motive is profit, and by a government that is little inclined to discussion, and from whom there is little hope of great efforts on the social or ecological front.

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